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FACTS AND FICTIONS IN ENGLISH.¹

THE experience of one member at least of your committee suggests a variation of the saying, "Facts are stubborn things," to, Facts are elusive, and fictions are stubborn. The facts about English training and English requirements are desperately hard to get at, but the prejudices and grievances associated with English are ubiquitous.

One fact is that there is no more fault to be found with the English prescriptions for work than with those in any other department of learning where a teacher or his teaching is unexpectedly found deficient. The fiction at this point is that a teacher or principal or superintendent who would hesitate to offer a judgment in the case of mathematics or of botany feels perfectly qualified to support one in English.

The fact is that college teachers are anxious to meet the schools at the point where the latter have completed the training really, and therefore logically, preliminary to the stage of education intrusted to the college. The fiction is that the college teachers are trying to put the drudgery of education into the schools, while they reserve to themselves the easy, delightful, self-indulgent occupations of discovery and exposition by lecture.

The fact is that college teachers find themselves puzzled by the inconclusiveness of their own theory and practice, in view of the material furnished them, and are anxious to have the help in interpreting conditions and characters made possible for teachers by acquaintance and familiarity during the earlier years of the student's training. The fiction is that the college teacher distrusts the school-teacher, wishes to flunk the candidate, and keeps a mill where the grist of human character and attainments is to be ground into percentages, degrees, and honors, or low grades, conditions, and drops.

¹ Paper read at the fourth annual meeting of the New England Association of Teachers of English, held in Boston, Mass., March 19, 1904.

The fact is that the college examiner is quite as anxious to have students to teach as the school-teacher is to get them a chance to be taught. The fiction is that the college examiners have set up a golden calf, known as a high standard, to which they sacrifice and with horrid rites abjure the true faith in simple industry, clear thought, and sweet reasonableness.

The fact is that the critic of English is in nine cases out of ten a chronic grumbler, or a man with a chip on his shoulder. The fiction is that the burdens of bricks without straw imposed by the English requirements have forced every secondary school to show why there should not be an exodus led by its principal or superintendent, who was the meekest of men until roused by intolerable wrongs.

The fiction is that the formal requirements in English for entrance to college are the occasion of abuses and wrongs in the teaching of English in the schools. The fact is that the rights of English as such in the schools began with these requirements. The abolition of English examination tests might, as has been suggested, save the state an outlay of many thousands of dollars in poor text-books and misguided and misleading teachers, but it would put a burden upon teachers of mathematics, science, and foreign languages that they seem by no means ready to accept, and that few observers of their daily work and conversation would judge them competent to discharge.

It is a fact that the modern principle of division of labor has sharply isolated English. It has made it of necessity a study. The old notion that English is the mother-tongue of the people of the United States is no longer tenable. It is a fiction, but it is stronger than truth with the low-spirited and the spiritually muddled.

It is a fact that the teachers in college would like to find in the candidates for admission to the first class initiation, interest, and respect for hard work in its proper place. It is a fiction that under these names they have ever called for eccentricity, self-will, and gush.

It is a fact that the student who is really poor in English is usually poor in everything else. It is a fiction that the student

who is clever in English gets more than his share of the teacher's good things, such as marks and prizes, while the industrious mathematician has his labor for his pains.

It is a fiction that the English requirements are an additional insult to the already injured vitality of the school programs. The fact is that as many schools wish recognition for their treatment of English as feel oppressed by the requirement of any study of it.

It is a fiction that the English examiners want strange, contradictory, and excessive things. It is a fact that they would wish to have good spelling, simple idiomatic English, a fixed habit of inquiring the meaning of words, the power of reading aloud intelligibly, of speaking and writing connectedly on subjects properly within their attention as students. It is a fiction that students are to be educated before they come to college.

It is a fiction that there is any one way by which these ends may be accomplished, or that less than the entire energy of school and college will be required in some cases, or that in others these results may not be attained without them or in spite of them.

It is a fiction that the "prescribed books" are an evidence of college rapacity and self-will. It is a fact that the list is the result of a long series of compromises between the ambitions of strong schools and the necessities of weak schools, on one side; on the other, between the claims of methods of reaching the single result of a reasonable command of the mother-tongue, as far apart as literary appreciation and literary scholarship, with or without grammar and composition.

It is a fiction that the books were chosen with a peculiar desire to force the student into acquaintance with what he would naturally avoid. It is a fact that the books were chosen because some of them were masterpieces, some of them were thought likely to be interesting, because they all avoided the vexed subject of copyright.

It is a fiction that all boys or girls naturally like or dislike any given book. It is a fact that the plays of Shakespeare are the one feature of the present requirement reported as "certain to go," *i. e.*, to be enjoyed by the students.

It is a fiction that good spelling and correct punctuation were ever widely distributed accomplishments of English-speaking persons. That they are *lost arts* is therefore a fiction. It is a fact that natural science and methods of observation have not secured the accuracy in these respects that some advocates have claimed for them.

Finally, this is a fiction that the English requirement strains the examination system harder than do other subjects. It is a fact that the report of the teachers of Greek who read the books for the candidates for entrance to college by the Examining Board of the Middle States and Maryland was that Greek was the worst-taught subject on the list.

It is a fact that, as Thackeray put it, "things is'nt so bad;" and in a few particulars your committee thinks it sees its way to making them better.

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